DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 286 539 JC 870 376

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TITLE The Case Method of Teaching: Community College Faculty Are Taking a "Harvard Method" and Making It Their Own.
INSTITUTION Education Development Center, Inc., Newton, Mass.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Business Education; Community Colleges; *Discussion (Teaching Technique); Evaluative Thinking; *Inservice Teacher Education; *Intercollegiate Cooperation; *Problem Solving; *Teacher Workshops; *Teaching Methods; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS *Case Method (Teaching Technique)

ABSTRACT

The Alliance for Business Literacy Education (ABLE), a composite of several Harvard professors, the Education Development Center (EDC), and the League for Innovation in the Community College, is working to promote the nationwide use in community colleges of a teaching strategy known as the case method. The case method combines the freedom of class discussion with a careful plan of action that will lead students to analyze a situation, identify the problems, and propose and assess alternative solutions. While this method is hardly new, it has not been widely used despite its merits. Postsecondary faculty have had few chances to see it in action or learn about its key aspects (i.e., how to assume the role of facilitator, create the right kind of classroom climate, and maintain the right degree of direction and control). ABLE has developed a series of original cases that would teach decision making in business and be custom-tailored to the needs of community colleges. After having overall positive results with draft editions of the cases, ABLE began a broad training effort that built upon the small-scale, but successful, transfer of expertise that had already taken place in the project. EDC developed and produced a 60-minute videotape and a guide to the method, which were used in five regional workshops attended by over 150 faculty representing more than 40 colleges. While the EDC continues to distribute the package, the real action is taking place on the local campuses, where faculty are able to take a different look at how they teach, and encourage students to participate actively in their own learning. (EJV)

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ED286539

The Case Method of Teaching

Community college faculty are taking a "Harvard method" and making it their own

by Cynthia Lang
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Cynthia Lang is Co-Director of the Case Method Project, Education Development Center, Inc., Newton, Massachusetts. Her background is in journalism, writing for visual media, and mass communication (she is on the faculty at the Boston University College of Communication); in education (among her publications, she is the co-author with Jerome Kagan of the undergraduate level education text, Psychology and Education: An Introduction, [New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, 1978]), and in the training of professionals.

Years ago a trio of baseball players saved the game with a spectacular three-step play, and "Tinker to Evers to Chance" entered the American vocabulary as a metaphor for a successful transfer. Presently, an educational alliance is at work on a different kind of three-step play: the transfer--from expert practitioners to newcomer faculty--of a teaching strategy known as the case method. The story of this transfer, and the linkages it is creating in community college networks, mirrors the essence of the case method itself. It is a method that depends on a group. It works a little differently each time, depending on the setting and the people. And offering unequalled opportunities for student participation and learning, it offers as well a chance for teacher revitalization.

What is the case method? This method of teaching combines the freedom of class discussion with a careful plan of action that will lead students to analyze a situation, identify the problems, and propose and assess alternative solutions. The "case," which provides the situation and the focus of the discussion, is usually a written document: whether one page long or twenty, the case presents people, a story, a plot, facts, and an implicit problem to be solved. Students, putting themselves in someone else's shoes, get a chance to rehearse judgment as they work to answer the question, "What actions should I take?"

The case method is hardly new. Over the years, instructors have discovered for themselves the merits of this approach and incorporated it into their teaching. At Harvard, for instance, in the Graduate School of Business Administration, it is used almost exclusively. Its merits are easy to see. The methodology offers a way of learning that is both engaging and effective.

It is consistent with adult learning theory: it presents materials that are relevant to adults' life experiences and invites the learners to draw on those experiences to solve true-to-life problems. The cases themselves are an inexpensive, modular format that can be used in existing courses without displacing essential aspects of the established syllabus. Add the fact that the method can engage adults who are reluctant to wade through textbooks loaded with theory, that it focuses on practical rather than theoretical questions, and that it provides an alternative way to tap the true abilities of students for whom writing is sometimes a problem, and its advantages for the community college classroom are obvious.

Yet the method has not been widely used. Outside of business, postsecondary faculty, in either their undergraduate or graduate training, have had few chances to see it in action or learn about its key aspects: how to assume the role of a facilitator, plan and pose questions, draw on students' experience and prior knowledge, create the right kind of classroom climate (and physical arrangement), and maintain the right degree of direction and control. The transfer that is underway, therefore, represents a milestone. It is the first systematic attempt to introduce the case method to community college faculty nationwide.

The Alliance for Business Literacy Education (ABLE) began when Associate Professor David A. Garvin from the Harvard Business School came to the Education Development Center with an idea: "This method works at the graduate level," he said. "Let's see how well it would work with another audience." Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC), is a 28-year old nonprofit organization right outside of Boston. Known nationally and internationally for its

work in education, it is expert in developing materials and programs, and in training, technical assistance, and dissemination. One of its hallmarks is its ability to "translate" good ideas and practices in ways that have applications in new settings. EDC enlisted the third partner in the Alliance: the League for Innovation in the Community College. Made up of nineteen member colleges that represent a student enrollment of about a million, the League works nationally to promote excellence and innovation in community colleges.

The alliance, initially made up of several Harvard professors, a private non-profit educational organization, and a national membership group, began with a specific task. With funds from the Exxon Education Foundation, ABLE set out to develop a series of original cases that would teach decision-making in business and be custom-tailored to the needs of community college classes. The League for Innovation selected six faculty to work with EDC: Robert Kersten and Gerry Welch, St. Louis Community College District; Robert Mellert and Debbie Meyer, Brookdale Community College, New Jersey; and David Stringer and Marguerite Will, Foothill-De Anza Community College, California. They represented different departments (five in Business and one in Philosphy), parts of the country, and experience with the method. One had used it for thirty years, several had tried something like it, and one was openly skeptical.

The "ABLE Six," as they were soon called, first came to Boston to discuss how the cases could contribute to their teaching, and the requirements they had for the cases: relevance, length, complexity, and amount of quantitative data. They also visited Harvard. Observing Dave Garvin teaching several classes, they could see how the method worked. "That made all the difference:

you really have to see this in action," Mimi Will remarked. The visit also dispelled some myths. "I thought this might work with ten or twenty students," said Debbie Meyer. "At Harvard, there were over seventy in each class."

Over the next few months case writers in Boston developed drafts of the six cases. "Think Volkswagen," for instance, examines Doyle, Dane Bernbach's famous and successful ad campaign. It looks at sales figures in the U.S. auto market some 25 years ago and asks students to determine the best way to launch a similar effort in today's quite different marketplace. "So You Think You Know How to Run a McDonald's?" presents a day in the life of a store owner of a typical McDonald's restaurant. It asks students to place themselves in his shoes and consider the factors he must consider and the decisions he must make as he manages his franchise. The ABLE Six reviewed and critiqued the cases in draft form. Then, to prepare for the pilot test of the cases (a key part of EDC's development process) they made another trip to Boston. During an intensive one-day session, Dave Garvin trained them to teach the cases and to use the method.

Through the spring of 1985 the ABLE Six tried out the cases and, invariably, the method. Not without some stumbling and hesitancy, they admit. But the results were better, even, than had been anticipated.

For one thing, students learned. "The basis of microeconomics is decision-making," says Gerry Welch. "Discussing the McDonald's case, students were able to integrate concepts such as opportunity cost and the need to prioritize work and decisions. Students really got into questions of equipment purchase

and pay differentials for employees." Adds Bob Kersten, also from St. Louis: "McDonald's relates to chapters in the text on management, organization, marketing, and also elements of production policy, franchise, and product control."

For another thing, the class was exciting. "The case method changed the classroom dynamics. It focused on what students already know but couldn't articulate," states Bob Mellert, who used a case as a focus for problemsolving in his Introduction to Philosophy course. "People enjoyed not just taking notes and 'parroting' them back," said Dave Stringer, from De Anza College. "And they felt the case method was more realistic."

The faculty made some important suggestions that were used to revise the drafts, and they have now been published by Dryden Press as Cases in Business Decision Making. Overall the cases seemed to work well. And what emerged in the process was a new and different need: to train faculty from a range of disciplines in the use of the method.

In September 1986, with a grant from FIPSE (The Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, U.S. Department of Education), the alliance began a broad training effort that built on the small-scale but successful "transfer of expertise" that had already occurred. It also built on that early comment: "You really have to see this method in action." EDC, working with Urbanimage FilmVideo of Boston, developed and produced a 60-minute videotape called "Tools for Teaching: The Case Method," that shows a slice-of-life in a case method class. Project staff also wrote a guide, Case Method Teaching in the Community College. Using this training package, EDC and the League for

Innovation have held five regional workshops: at Massachusetts Bay Community College, Brookdale Community College, St. Louis Community College at Meramec, Foothill College, and Austin Community College. Each workshop was led by a team: an EDC staff person plus one of the ABLE faculty, and the workshops were invitational. "We are interested in seeing the method used broadly, and used well," says Terry O'Banion, Director of the League for Innovation. "That is, used by faculty who like to try new approaches to teaching, who tend to respect their students' ideas, and who are comfortable not only as lecturers, but as the leaders of a discussion."

The invitations asked college administrators to select faculty from departments with courses that emphasize problem-solving: courses such as Philosophy, Psychology, Human Relations, and Allied Health, as well as Business, Marketing, or Microeconomics. The workshops focused on understanding the method and studying the techniques that make it work. They also involved participants in making plans for promoting the method with interested colleagues back home on their own campuses, since a major goal of the project was to develop cadres of faculty interested in the method. "The method is about groups," says Vivian Guilfoy, Co-Director of the project. "It's based on using the best thinking of a number of people, not just one. A group of several faculty on any campus can form an important alliance to support their individual teaching, and also the process of faculty development over time."

The first players in this transfer are established experts in the method at Harvard, such as David Garvin and project advisor C. Roland Christensen, author of Teaching and the Case Method. The next players are the "ABLE Six." "I introduced the project and the cases at a Department meeting last year,"

says Gerry Welch. "Now, sometimes I walk into a classroom and see a xeroxed stack of the cases. I can't even be sure who is using them. But people are trying them out!" One of the places they've been tried is the minimum security prison in St. Louis, where Clark Compton teaches a Business Organization and Management course: "It came off really well. I'd used cases in graduate courses before, but not in undergraduate courses and not in this setting."

The third players are faculty from all around the country. Meeting each other for the first time, they have the chance to learn about one another's work, and to plan together how they can use the method to achieve a wide range of teaching objectives. Several, for instance, see the cases and the method as tools to use in ongoing efforts to develop critical thinking skills. Staff from a Minority Business Training Center were interested in the possibilities the method offers them in their role as counselors to clients. One faculty person whose focus is the use of writing to build academic skills was outspoken on the merits of discussion classes: "In the beginning, the students often feel gypped. At the end, they feel so satisfied. In classes with a big discussion component we find attendance is up and teacher evaluations are high."

Over a hundred and fifty faculty have attended the workshops. They represented more than forty colleges and almost as many departments, including Accounting and Biology, Counseling, and Criminal Justice, Drama and Communications, Hotel Management and Health. In addition Co-Directors Vivian Guilfoy and Cynthia Lang have made presentations at the annual conferences of the League for Innovation, AACJC, the National Institute of Staff and

Organizational Development (NISOD), and the FIPSE Project Directors Conference. These have reached another hundred faculty and administrators.

It doesn't stop there. Participants, armed with a copy of the video, share what they've learned about the method back home. They draw in colleagues through professional development activities that range from informal "brown bag" lunch sessions to day-long replications of the FIPSE workshop. So far these have included several cross-department workshops, a workshop for all instructors in an allied health division, another for all part-time instructors in a division, and a presentation to a multi-campus professional development committee. Several colleges plan to make a videotape of their own. One staff development person took the videotape to a vocational-technical training conference in Singapore.

EDC is currently distributing the training package through its not-for-profit Publishing Center so that successive generations of newcomer faculty can continue to learn about the method beyond the grant period. But the real action is now on local campuses. As faculty form their own campus alliances and use cases in their own teaching, they are making the method their own. With support from the Exxon Education and from FIPSE, EDC and the League for Innovation are replicating "Tinker to Evers to Chance." In the process they are enabling faculty in community colleges across the country to take a different look at how they teach, and encourage their students to participate actively in their own learning.

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